



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

*An initiative of
the National Academy of Public Administration,
and the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs
and the Bobst Center for Peace and Justice,
Princeton University*

Oral History Program

Series:

Government Traps

Interview no.:

K2

Interviewee: Kim Sedara

Interviewer: Rohan Mukherjee

Date of Interview: 26 October 2009

Location: Phnom Penh
Cambodia

Innovations for Successful Societies, Bobst Center for Peace and Justice
Princeton University, 83 Prospect Avenue, Princeton, New Jersey, 08544, USA
www.princeton.edu/successfulsocieties

MUKHERJEE: It is the 26th of October 2009, my name is Rohan Mukherjee and I am with Kim Sedara, a senior researcher at the Cambodia Development Resource Institute (CDRI). So Mr. Sedara, if I could just start by asking you to provide a little bit of background about yourself and your studies on Cambodia.

SEDARA: *Yes, I started my university in archeology here in Cambodia and in 1994 I got an East-West Center scholarship to further my study in cultural anthropology in the graduate school at the University of Hawaii in America. Then I returned to Cambodia in '96. In '98 I got a Fulbright Scholarship. I went first to Stanford and then moved to Northern Illinois University in Dekalb, Illinois, for another master's degree because at that time with the Fulbright money you were not allowed to do a Ph.D. So I did more on economics and political anthropology. Then I returned to Cambodia in 2001 and started with CDRI as a senior researcher in charge of governance. In 2005 I got a Swedish government scholarship to do my Ph.D. in political science in Gothenburg University. This is my educational background.*

Then in addition to my academic background, since 2000 or 2001 I've been extensively publishing many articles, including a book, here in CDRI and also abroad. My main focus of research is about the post conflict reconstruction of Cambodia, the election, decentralization, de-concentration reforms, civil society, and governance at large.

MUKHERJEE: Could you talk a little bit about the reconstruction efforts, particularly about rebuilding of state institutions, the reconstruction of the administration, post the UNTAC (The United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia) period?

SEDARA: *Before I can say something about post-UNTAC, I have to give you a little historical background. Cambodia remains in a post-conflict stage. I would say that the problem of the post-conflict reconstruction of Cambodia has three aspects. The first one is the turbulent past because since the early '70s, Cambodia has gone through at least six major political regimes, resulting in an interruption of political and historical institutions in terms of ideology and in terms of leadership. This kind of institutional interruption makes it very difficult for the state institutions to be responsive and accountable to its citizens.*

The second aspect is the political culture. As you know, when we talk about culture it is a complex paradigm. Each society has its own culture, but Cambodia is still embedded in a kind of a patron-client relationship rent-seeking, the old paternal system which you can see everywhere in Southeast Asia.

The third aspect is the nature of international intervention which is linked directly to your question about UNTAC. I think I would question the nature of international intervention in the early '90s in Cambodia. UNTAC was quite successful and yet, somehow UNTAC was not really successful. The success story of UNTAC is the introduction of a liberal democracy to Cambodia and the organization of elections, ending the civil war. However, there are a lot of chronic issues still going on that UNTAC did not really change. The first one is that UNTAC was not able to transfer power to the elected political party. UNTAC was not able to disarm the Khmer Rouge. UNTAC was not able to establish a stable political and economic institution in the country. So Cambodia ended up having a coalition government and ended up having to fight the Khmer Rouge until 1998, five years after UNTAC. We see shaky political and economic institutions in the country even now. So this is not a good legacy, but a bad legacy from the UNTAC.

I wouldn't say it is the nature of international intervention everywhere, but the problem is not only in Cambodia, you see it in Africa, in Asia, in the Middle East. In Afghanistan right now exactly the same thing is happening. After UNTAC, Cambodia tried to reestablish or reinvent itself. Cambodia reinvented its own state institutions from scratch. You can build a house from scratch quite easily, but it is very difficult to renovate an irreplaceable ancient, ruined temple. You have to fix, you cannot replace.

That's why I see the political institutions in Cambodia as very complex. It is not building a new thing from scratch, it is fixing, treating and curing the disease in the state institutions. It is very difficult. First, the west and international communities tried to import to this country the idea that every Cambodian be exposed to the rule of law, exposed to the notion of civil society, exposed to the notion of liberal democracy. They wanted to see it to happen here, but it is not easy because the people did not really understand what was going on. You know they lack experience. Look at the whole history of Cambodia, we didn't have a strong, vibrant civil society while right now the neo-liberal international institutions talk about good governance, accountability, responsiveness. Everything had to be learned by doing, in short.

The second problem is human resources. I think it is very difficult for the country after the UNTAC period. Human resources? I think Cambodia had only roughly 8 doctors in the whole country so why, after the Khmer Rouge. Cambodia has been through civil war for thirty years, it's not that easy. It's a chronic situation and human resources are a major problem. You can set up a beautiful framework for a state institution, but without human resources there's nothing inside.

I think the third one is the problem of the geopolitics in the region. In the early '90s, it was very difficult for Cambodia to do things by itself. You have Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore in the western world and you have Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, included, that used to be under the communist system. So you are changing the system from one ideology to another, from the east to the west. It's not that easy. These are the three problems that Cambodia is facing right now. I am very optimistic that Cambodia will move ahead out of this post conflict trap.

If you read the report of the World Bank, you see 45% of post conflict societies that emerge out of conflict, fall back into civil war five years later. But Cambodia has not. Of course, there was a little bit of a hiccup in 1997, but now things move quite smoothly. I grew up in the Khmer Rouge period, in the '80s, and see quite a different Cambodia now

Many things need to be done about social issues, economic issues, political issues and the rule of law, especially. One of the most difficult things during the post conflict reconstruction is to restore the legal framework. You can write a very beautiful constitution, you can write very good laws, but you need internalization of the law into the minds of people. They write the law, but law enforcement of the laws they write is kind of weak, because people don't understand. People are not used to the law. This needs a lot of time for improvement.

And Cambodia needs to have a system of a higher education to restore the intellectual elite, not only the economic elite. You have to have a real elite like the bourgeoisie in France, a middle class who has education, who can earn enough income in order to survive and who can understand what Cambodia needs.

MUKHERJEE: You mentioned the human resource problem that the state faced in the early '90s. How was that overcome? How did the state attract human resources?

SEDARA: *I think human resources come from two sources. The first one is the state policy to liberalize education at large. We have 57 public and private higher education institutions. Since the early '90s when the country was exposed to the international arena, people picked up languages, people traveled and then the Cambodian diaspora returned. A chain of information about education emerged resulting from this movement of people. But right now I'm not saying that we have a good system of education.*

I think what the state needs to do right now is to improve the quality of education instead of talking mostly about the quantity of it. You have many universities, you have many students, but what the heck, if you don't have the quality—. The state opened up the door so that the younger generation, like my generation who grew up in the Khmer Rouge, has the opportunity to be exposed, but only a handful of bourgeoisie in the city have the opportunity to go to a university, learn a language, English mainly, and French, get a scholarship, go abroad and then bring back new ideas in terms of higher education.

MUKHERJEE: Was there, in terms of even staffing the civil service or government departments, a huge shortage of talented individuals to do that? Was there a concerted policy on the part of the government to attract individuals for that?

SEDARA: *Since '79, the state, mainly the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) and later on the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) tried their best to reestablish the state institution and to mobilize qualified people to join the government. But you know, after the UNTAC era, the free market economy is based on salary. It is very hard right now. The government cannot compete with the private sector and the NGOs (non-government organization) because of the low salary.*

There are a lot of educated Cambodians, who having a good heart, join the government. But they have to think about their stomachs first. They have to strike a balance in terms of salary and income. That is why you see some educated Cambodian people working at multiple jobs. Some join the government and also sneak out and do something else like consulting work.

The government, right now provides quite a meager salary to its own public servants. They know that they cannot live on this salary and that is why the government is very flexible right now. You can call it tolerance. It's tolerance toward its own public servants. You work for the government but you are free to do something else as long as you can manage your time. So that is how things work quite well. It is not based on a kind of a rational blue print approach that you have to work for one institution and if you do something else, it is a conflict of interest. It is not like that because you cannot provide sufficient salary for people to survive. So that is how this works here.

MUKHERJEE: So going back again to the period following the first election of 1993, what were the main state-building priorities of the government at that time?

SEDARA: *I think the main state-building priority of the government at the time was security. Peace or security meaning the absence of war, still, a positive peace, the end of conflict basically. Then the second priority is to have enough food for people to survive. It's not even poverty alleviation. Of course, mostly everybody is in poverty in Cambodia, let alone the elite. The third one is to reconsolidate, even*

security, to reconcile the wound. Bring back all opposition groups together as one society. That is what I see. That is why evolvment is a bit slow since after the UNTAC. You see lower results from the aid that international agencies gave to the small country and why the outcome is quite low because the state does not have appropriate institutions to work effectively.

Most of the operation by international agencies is through funding, but they do it by themselves, so the money boomerangs somehow. It is hard to blame them from what I see from over ten years of experience working here in Cambodia.

MUKHERJEE: Moving to the post '97 period, after the brief laps of security in '97, it seems that from '97 onwards to the present day the Cambodian government has been able to achieve quite a lot in terms of shoring up the institutions of the state. So did the priorities change after the fall of the Khmer Rouge?

SEDARA: *I think in the beginning from '79 on until '84, '85, Cambodia was struggling in a kind of a trap of the Stalinist, Communist system, a central command, a centralized economy. Security was the main point at the border. There was a conflict with the Khmer Rouge, but after '85 on there was an incentive for ideas to reform the communist system inside the CPP, Cambodian People's Party, at that time. So they had to open up. They had to open their door in order to survive. They could not afford an economic embargo from the West.*

But although Cambodia in the '80s was under economic embargo, there was a lot of smuggling and leaking around the border with Thailand so it was still pretty much open. That's why I see that Cambodian leaders, since the '80s, have had the idea of a free market economy, at least from '85 on. It started from inside the Communist Party.

MUKHERJEE: And who are the individuals who propagated this idea?

SEDARA: *I think the current Prime Minister Hun Sen, was the one who was quite liberal and open since he became prime minister from '85 on. I read a book by Evan Gottesman when I was a boy in high school; I still remember that when I read the book I tried to match with what my memory was from that time and I see it was quite right. That is why I see Cambodia without this kind of political incentive or political will. The international community is unable to do anything right because it has to be a match between the two.*

MUKHERJEE: For the prime minister, what do you think his vision for Cambodia was at the time when he started—what prompted this change in ideology towards more freedom?

SEDARA: *I'm not sure what he thought at the time, but personally I see that everybody who has lived through the Khmer Rouge, every Cambodian, was fed up with this kind of civil war and conflict. They craved for something better. Regardless of whether he is the prime minister or a Cambodian leader, they want to see a country moving forward. That's why the way out is to have economic and political reform.*

MUKHERJEE: Did he rely on a team of reformers to help him implement his designs?

SEDARA: *I don't know about this but it must be key persons in the party, in the government, but I don't know whom. It couldn't be just be one person.*

MUKHERJEE: So in the modern period again, coming back to post '97, what have been the main priorities of the government after 1997 in terms of institutional development?

SEDARA: *From 1997 onwards, I think they put the alleviation of poverty number one and fighting corruption in governance number two and human resources, education and delivery of services are also included. That's why, I think since UNTAC onward, under the influence of international communities, Cambodia is trying to comply with a lot of the international norms imposed from the West: good governance, transparency, poverty alleviation, service delivery. Cambodia is not unique, it had to comply with these norms.*

MUKHERJEE: You mentioned that there can be no real reform without political will and I was wondering, even for someone like the Prime Minister who may have had the political will to reform, there must have been many other sections in the political circles who were opposed to reform. There must have been some vested interests in the system who were benefiting from bad governance in the past.

SEDARA: *Yes, you know Caroline [Hughes] right? And Kheang [Un], he was my buddy. They wrote a government analysis in Cambodia and then pictured a white hat and a black hat. He said that Cambodia was pretty much influenced by the black hat because there were people who benefit from bad governance. Of course! But you have to have very strict rule of law and law enforcement. When you look at every society that emerges out of post conflict, there are a lot of opportunists, especially the ones with power, especially in Africa and other countries in the world. That's why, to get rid of opportunists, you have to have a very rationalized, stable state institution which is functioning properly in order to solve these problems.*

Cambodia right now is working on this. I'm not saying that we have a lot of opportunists right now. But I think the younger generation equipped with education, although they know that their parents are really doing negative stuff, know they have to do something. Education would be the way forward.

MUKHERJEE: One of the things that the government has done in the new millennium at least is to engage in decentralization in a big way. What is the objective behind that?

SEDARA: *CDRI (Cambodian Development and Resource Institute) is one of the leading research institutes on governance in general and especially decentralization. I've been involved since 2002 onward. I think there are three objectives within decentralization. The first one is to have a kind of a pluralist political system in place, with participation and engagement. The second one is to have poverty alleviation through service delivery and the third one to restore the local democratic institution. In the very beginning, the government and UNTAC were not able to establish credible and reliable state institutions. That's why right now the state has to bring democracy down to the local level and have decentralization. But I see many reforms, major reforms, in Cambodia: judicial reform, military reform, administrative reform and public finance reform, the three major reforms, and D and D, decentralization and deconcentration as part of public administration reform.*

But after seven and eight years, the achievement was to establish local democratic state institutions in place. You have the commune election and council and opposition, working and sitting together. It is very interesting in a post conflict society where everybody was just pointing a gun at each other, now they

come and sit together. And, the state has a kind of channel to deliver some services, not much but at least there is some small-scale infrastructure development down in the local area.

MUKHERJEE: Normally when decentralization occurs there is always a fear from the national level that leaders at the sub national level might become too powerful, but at the same time it is important to, as you said, take development down to the local levels. So has Cambodia faced that tension between national and local?

SEDARA: *Not yet. I'm not sure. It might not happen, but it might happen too. The elite captured the issue of decentralization. It's not that easy to take power away from a small group of people. Right now we see a lot of problems, but the state is responding nicely. We have a line of power and line of accountability still based at the line ministry. But right now there is a sub-national government trying to harmonize and unify administration. Now they have an indirect election at the district level, above the commune and then the provincial level to create a council and try to put all the services and power together.*

The elite may capture decentralization, but I think there is nothing to be captured because there's no money or not much. We have about 15,000 U.S. dollars per year for every commune on average from the state. Each commune doesn't have the power to generate its own revenue yet, so there's no social contract. But I'm quite optimistic that with decentralization, we're going to build a stable, reliable, local institution. I think along the way it will be very important.

MUKHERJEE: So it seems so far that the main decentralization has been in terms of democracy, that elections have taken place. But financial and administrative decentralization has not.

SEDARA: *Theoretically, when we talk about decentralization, we talk about devolution of power. This we have achieved quite successfully. We have a fair election and multiparty system in place and then we created elected commune councils, 1621 communes, total, in the country. The second one we have not achieved yet, but I think all the stakeholders involved are trying to alleviate poverty and deliver services, but not yet.*

MUKHERJEE: There is also an argument in a lot of the literature that comes up which is that Cambodia is headed steadily towards a one-party dominant democracy and this in a way has been good for institutional development in Cambodia. Yet, there are still questions about democratic viability of such a system going ahead. Do you see the tension coming up?

SEDARA: *I think one has to put this into a regional context. When you talk about a one-party system, you talk about an Asian style of democracy, the Singaporean way. I think when you look at all of Cambodia's neighbors, we have all kinds of the basically one-party system. Look at Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore. But to me, I think everything is about short-term, there's nothing wrong in having one party if a one party state can deliver on the demands of the people. So people don't care whether you have three parties, four parties or thirty parties, as long as the ruling party delivers.*

From a democratic point of view, it is not good, right? But for the particular Cambodian situation, Cambodia needs an effective state. It is in my personal view that you need a very responsible, very accountable and responsive state to deliver to the needs of the people. So I think whether it is one-party or two-party,

it doesn't matter as long as you have very strong functional system of democracy. Elections, transparency, accountability, distinguish what is the private and public domains clearly. Legitimacy is very important. If you have one party and you have a very effective election system, you can kick out the leader easily. In Cambodia we don't need many parties and then find the political situation during the election is sort of out of control. I think you have to be careful about this as well.

MUKHERJEE: Then on the issue of legitimacy, where do you think the Cambodian state derives its legitimacy from right now?

SEDARA: *I think if you asked me the question ten years ago, I'd say it was completely a big mess in terms of legitimacy, but after seventeen years of international intervention, after UNTAC, legitimacy is improving right now. State leaders are aware of the importance of legitimate elections and many kinds of reforms and legitimacy right now is quite good. But this is in theory. In reality, Cambodian people don't understand much about the rights of citizenship. You are a voter but then what they should do with the vote? That's why you need political education through decentralization.*

Cambodian leaders are very good and smart at the same time because they endorse decentralization and endorse other elections, both direct and indirect elections. They have to work hard as well, although they are in power. They have to work hard in order to be re-elected, otherwise—I call it a political education. As time goes on people start to be aware that they are the power holders.

MUKHERJEE: One problem in studying various developing countries is that of patronage. In the appointment of, or even in the distribution of important positions in government you often find certain political factions have a claim. This is something we've seen in other countries and Cambodia was witness to it in the 1990s when the two main political parties had a lot of new positions in civil service created to satisfy that kind of a demand. Is that patronage system in any way reduced now in Cambodia as the state develops further or is it still a problem?

SEDARA: *I don't have an answer for this. I'm not saying it is declining or rising, but a patronage system here is becoming less visible in a way. Of course you have nepotism in every state institution, but they have to go through at least professional layers, such as, at least the level of education. You have to have some commitments, through the political party or kinship in Cambodia. But I would say this about patronage, you need this in a country absent a social safety net, absent a welfare system. You cannot rely on the state. But I think patronage will be less active when you have a reliable state institution that can deliver.*

MUKHERJEE: How important has been the role of donors in the entire process of development?

SEDARA: *In the development arena in Cambodia, I think you have to give some credit to the donors because they've been very active in the nation state building of Cambodia after UNTAC. Somehow I see a lot of donors still sitting in kind of '93 or '94 emergency state. They should get out of that right now. They should integrate and use Cambodian human resources in this country for Cambodia. But right now I see a kind of fraction among the donors; each donor has its own agenda from Stockholm, Paris, New York, elsewhere. They need to organize themselves, they need a very good line of accountability themselves and they*

need to be strategic, understand the political economy of Cambodia and based on what is the Cambodian context.

I see a lot of donors still operating in a global governance system instead of a Cambodian system. Principles like democracy, accountability, transparency, these are universal principles that you need to comply with but somehow you have to be a little bit down to earth. Maybe the context in Vietnam or Thailand is different from Cambodia and Cambodia is different from other countries as well.

It is not written in stone. That is the weak spot of the donors right now. That is why some donors fail to get results from the money spent.

MUKHERJEE: To conclude, do you have any other thoughts on the things that we've spoken about?

SEDARA: *My last word, I see Cambodia moving forward quite well as are other countries in the region in southeast Asia and hopefully in the future will continue to do so. If we have a more developed kind of society and we have good human resources, if we manage the natural resources in a sustainable way and have a political system for the sake of the country instead of for the sake of a small group, then this country can move forward quite nicely. I think it will have a fine and quite positive future. That's it.*

MUKHERJEE: Thank you.